

## The problem

1. We know from a range of polls that women are significantly more negative about the Government than men. We don't at present have a finer-grained analysis than this, though there is some suggestion that **fear for the next generation** is a major factor for many women. In addition, the group of Cabinet Office and No 10 women we assembled felt strongly that the general tone and messages of government communications, particularly around deficit reduction were an issue – with women, especially in the public sector feeling targeted; a general sense that families who had been struggling to get by even in the 'good times' resented being told to tighten their belts; and even a view that the Government's choice of leaders on the economy gave the implication was that 'now there's a real job to be done sorting out the mess, it can only be done by men.' (Clearly all of these needs a heavy caveat that it is anecdotal; and that of course women's views differ as much as men's, so generalisation can be unhelpful – but nevertheless, we found the insights useful.)
2. In addition, we are clear that there are a range of policies we have pursued as a Government which are seen as having hit women, or their interests, disproportionately, including:
  - Public sector pay and pensions (particularly as contrasted with – mostly male – bankers, in the popular narrative)
  - Tuition fees
  - Abolition of Child Trust Funds
  - Changes to child tax credit and the childcare element
  - Changes to child benefit
  - Rising cost of living
  - Lone parent obligations
  - Income support
3. Several of these potentially play into fears for the next generation; and it is also worth noting that many of these issues have been visible and prominent.
4. By contrast, we were able to list many areas where what we have done has been very positive – but many of these had received far less profile and attention. These include:
  - Extension of flexible working
  - Parental leave

- 2-year old nursery places
  - Health visitors
  - A wide range of impressive international activity – where international partners often praise the UK's record – but which we do not discuss domestically very much (and even internationally, we do not always leverage it as we could)
  - Free schools and academies (and the notion of choice in education – seen as positive by many even if not all)
5. There are also areas where we have made bold statements or promises but haven't delivered enough – including, for example, our overarching claim that we would be 'the most family friendly Government ever'; specific undertakings to increase the representation of women on Boards; and areas like Green Deal (which links to concern about the future).

#### Action

6. We generated a long list of ideas, including:
7. **Give Universal Credit to women as the default** – this is probably largely symbolic, as the current plans assume households would decide who applies – but sends a good signal.
8. **Front-load child benefit** to better reflect the profile of costs (although teenagers are expensive, the average family spends far more on young children, because of childcare and lost earnings in the early years)
9. **Work towards a proper ban on advertising to children** – using examples from other countries who have done this effectively
10. Force the pace on choice in maternity with **personal budgets** for maternity services; possibly linked to **parenting education vouchers**, of which we should make much
11. Develop a strategy – including possibly cross-party work – to ensure we have **women candidates for mayoral posts, PCCs, and LEPs**. Consider going further and setting up a review on barriers to women entering political life – looking not just as culture, but at structural barriers like uncertainty and lack of maternity provision.
12. Consider radically different options on **equal pay** – for instance, encouraging a third party to set up a pay-sharing website (you enter some

details and your own pay, and in return can see information about others') which gets around industry concerns about the costs of reporting on pay, but still gives good, transparent information

13. Make far more effort to recognise and celebrate **women in business and industry**. As a starting point – hold a No 10 summit for women entrepreneurs/women in business (we haven't had one yet); revisit Tech City and Engineering Prize plans and ensure good female representation; develop a wider Women and the Olympics plan, including a strand of the 'Great Britain' work. We should also challenge hard on what the actual proposals are to increase the representation of women on Boards; and in the longer-term should ask BIS to work with the CBI and others to look at cultural barriers to women's success in blue-chip firms. We should also challenge Cabinet Office colleagues to be more aggressive in tackling women's underrepresentation in the SCS, and in particular in areas like our overseas posts – where change could help improve policy and visibility as well as send a signal.
14. Look at where **transparency and better information** can help – for instance, giving as big a profile as possible to our transparency work around pupils' (and teachers') performance in schools; but also being clearer about the returns from different qualifications (including where qualifications have negative returns); and reviewing our policy and communications around **Family Information Services** (every council has one – they started as information-providers about childcare, but now stretch wider. The good ones are excellent but the quality is very patchy and more fundamentally, most people don't know they exist.)
15. If we are feeling brave – open the debate about the **school year**, and in particular a move away from the long summer holiday, which is very difficult for working families (and evidence suggests is bad for pupil progress too). This is tricky in the context of more school autonomy – but we could try some exhortation.
16. Focus on delivering a good package on **carers and long-term care** and identify this as, to a great extent, a women's issue. Women are disproportionately likely both to be carers in general, and to be part of the 'sandwich generation'.
17. Reconsider our decision **not to criminalise forced marriage**. This is tricky territory and there would be issues about reporting if we went for

criminalisation – but we should review this because the signal sent by opting not to criminalise is a bad one.

18. Ask for targeted Home Office work on **women, crime and confidence** – and consider focusing some of our anti-social behaviour work and messaging more effectively on women's concerns (and on helping women take action in communities).

### **Communications and messaging**

19. This links to the urgent need to up our game on communications about what we are doing. We propose that (possibly informed by more detailed polling) we assemble a first-rate team from across Government press offices and communications teams, and ask them to develop as radical and effective a communications strategy as possible, working quickly and intensively (say, over a ten-day period). The strategy should use the new policies above as a 'hook', but also do much more to get credit for the good things we have done already. We don't want to pre-judge this process – but as a starting-point, we think we could seek to build our work around a small number of key themes – for example:

- **We have good news for the next generation** – we need to change our messaging about deficit reduction, for example, and talk less about sorting out a mess, and more about building a better economy for the future. Our proposals on education, parenting, parental leave, and carers should be set in this context.
- **We recognise what women do already – particularly those who are struggling to make ends meet.** We should look critically at our communications plans around public sector workers with this in mind; and should fit proposals on front-loaded child benefit, universal credit, and advertising aimed at children into this narrative.
- **Women are key to British growth and success** – we will break down barriers that stop women realising their potential, and ours as a nation. Parental leave, flexible working, a big push on women in business, and a focus on more visible women leaders all fit here.